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Selected Speeches and News Releases

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IN THIS ISSUE:

News Releases—

USDA Announces 1992 Burley Tobacco No-Net-Cost Assessment

USDA's Sex Scent Recruits Soldier Bugs Into Gardens to Eat Pests

Biotechnology Advisory Committee Re-Chartered; 15 Members Selected

Acting Secretary Veneman Seeks Public Comments on Improving
USDA's Regulations

Bait Minnows Studied as Sentinels of Water Pollution

Below-Average Streamflows Forecast for Many Areas in West

USDA Announces Revision to Dairy Refund Payment Program

New Corn Resists Aflatoxin Fungus

USDA Announces Appointments to the United Soybean Board

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News Releases

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USDA ANNOUNCES 1992 BURLEY TOBACCO NO-NET-COST ASSESSMENT

WASHINGTON, Feb. 20—The U.S. Department of Agriculture today announced a no-net-cost assessment of .351 cents per pound for the 1992 crop of burley tobacco.

Keith Bjerke, executive vice president of USDA's Commodity Credit Corporation, said the no-net-cost assessment is in addition to the marketing assessment of 1.649 cents per pound required by the 1990 farm bill.

The no-net-cost assessment, plus the 1992 marketing assessment, means that 2 cents will be collected on each pound of burley tobacco marketed from the 1992 crop. The assessments will be shared equally between producers and purchasers with each paying 1 cent per pound.

Funds in the no-net-cost tobacco account ensure that the price support program for burley tobacco will be operated at no-net-cost to taxpayers, as required by the No-Net-Cost Tobacco Program Act of 1982.

CCC consulted with the Burley Tobacco Growers Cooperative Association and the Burley Stabilization Corporation, the producer-owned associations through which price support is made available for burley tobacco, before reaching a final determination.

Robert Feist (202) 720-6789

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USDA's SEX SCENT RECRUITS SOLDIER BUGS INTO GARDENS TO EAT PESTS

WASHINGTON—It might look like a badminton enthusiast went nuts, putting bright yellow “birdies” in his garden and hanging them in his trees.

But these cone-shaped pieces of plastic are no game. They are the latest weapon in the U.S. Department of Agriculture's war against hungry insect pests.

Inside the two-inch cone is a chemical replica of the sex scent, or pheromone, of the male spined soldier bug—a beneficial insect that hunts and devours garden and shade tree pests. The pheromone-laden cone is marketed under the name Rescue.

“The pheromone attracts spined soldier bugs into the area so they will be there to prey on pests,” said entomologist Jeffrey R. Aldrich of USDA’s Agricultural Research Service, Insect Chemical Ecology Laboratory, Beltsville, Md.

The bugs eat gypsy moth caterpillars, Mexican bean beetles, cabbage loopers, tent caterpillars, corn earworms, and more than 100 other pests.

Aldrich replicated the insect’s chemical blend, and ARS received a patent on it in 1987. In 1988, ARS granted an exclusive license for the pheromone to Sterling International, Inc., of Liberty Lake, Wash.

Sterling formulated the pheromone into a cone, and Aldrich evaluated the firm’s various formulations to find the best one. He found that at the peak emergence of the insect, just one attractor or cone can attract fifty or more spined soldier bugs in one day. Once attracted, the bugs reproduce to increase natural pest control in the garden, orchard and other foliage areas.

Aldrich said the pheromone is the first one to hit the market that attracts beneficial insects. Traditionally pheromones of pests themselves have been used—either to trap and count insects to determine the best spraying time, or to confuse mating so pests can’t produce offspring.

The male sex scent doesn’t attract just females. Other males and young spined soldier bugs are also lured. “The male often releases pheromone when he’s found food, so the other bugs respond hoping to find prey,” Aldrich said.

“Our research showed that gardeners have to get the cones out a week before bud-burst on the Red Maple tree, that way, the soldier bugs and their offspring will already be there in large numbers when the pests emerge. And that happens at different times in different areas,” said Aldrich.

In warm southern climates, Red Maples bud burst may occur by the first of March, while mid-March to early April is the time for the mid-Atlantic states. Residents of northern New England should put cones out around the second week of April. A second peak of newly emerged adults occurs in early summer.

Cones can be staked into the ground in a garden or hung on a tree, said Aldrich. One cone is recommended for every 150 square feet in the garden.

Small trees require just one cone, while very large ones need three. He said the pheromone lasts about sixty days, unless the weather is particularly hot.

"If you can't smell it, then it's gone," Aldrich said. The chemical smells somewhat like crushed leaves.

Aldrich said the cones have not been tested in fields, so he doesn't know if large-scale growers could benefit from it. Scientists at the University of Delaware are planning to test the pheromone in potato fields.

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Issued: February 21, 1992

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BIOTECHNOLOGY ADVISORY COMMITTEE RE-CHARTERED; 15 MEMBERS SELECTED

WASHINGTON, Feb. 21—Secretary Edward Madigan announced today that the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Agricultural Biotechnology Research Advisory Committee (ABRAC) has been re-chartered for two years and 15 members have been selected to serve on the committee.

The committee reviews research proposals and develops recommendations to USDA concerning the biosafety aspects of proposed research projects. The committee also provides policy advice to the secretary regarding agricultural biotechnology.

The 15 members chosen to serve on the committee represent a wealth of knowledge and expertise in biotechnology.

Committee members represent several disciplines, including ecology, veterinary science, entomology, forestry, plant science, microbiology, food science, law, public health and bioethics. Members are appointed to serve two-year terms.

The ABRAC members include: Dr. Anne R. Kapuscinski, associate professor, department of fisheries and wildlife, University of Minn.; James W. Lauderdale, director, senior scientist, The Upjohn Company, Kalamazoo, Mich.; Dr. Pamela G. Marrone, president, Entotech, Inc., Davis, Calif.; Dr. Ronald R. Sederoff, professor, department of forestry,

North Carolina State University, Raleigh, N.C.; Dr. William M. Witt, director, division of veterinary services, Food and Drug Administration, Jefferson, Ariz.; Dr. Deborah K. Letourneau, associate professor, board of environmental studies, University of California, Santa Cruz, Calif.; Dr. David A. Andow, associate professor, faculty, department of entomology, University of Minnesota, St. Paul, Minn.; Dr. Anne M. Vidaver, professor and chair, department of plant pathology, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, Neb.; Dr. Lee A. Bulla, professor and chair, department of molecular biology, college of agriculture, University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyo.

Also, Dr. Walter A. Hill, professor, dean, and research director, school of agriculture and home economics, Tuskegee University, Tuskegee, AL; Dr. Robert T. Fraley, director of plant science technology, Monsanto Company, St. Louis, Mo.; Dr. Susan Harlander, associate professor, department of food science and nutrition, University of Minnesota, St. Paul, Minn.; Dr. Edward P. Bruggemann, staff scientist, National Audubon Society, Washington, DC; Dr. Stanley Pierce, law partner, Rivkin, Radler, Bayh, Hart and Kremer, Uniondale, N.Y.; A. David Kline, professor and dean, college of liberal arts and sciences, State University of New York, New Paltz.

Dr. Harry C. Mussman, USDA's acting assistant secretary for science and education, will formally welcome the members at the next ABRAC meeting on Mar. 11-13. The meeting begins at 9 a.m. at the Rosslyn Westpark Hotel, Georgetown Room, 1900 N. Fort Myer Drive, Arlington, Va. 22209. The public is welcome.

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ACTING SECRETARY VENEMAN SEEKS PUBLIC COMMENTS ON IMPROVING USDA'S REGULATIONS

WASHINGTON, Feb. 21—Acting Secretary of Agriculture Ann Veneman announced today the U.S. Department of Agriculture is seeking public comment on ways to improve the department's regulations and programs.

“The president directed us in his State of the Union Address to work with the public to identify regulations and programs that impose a substantial cost on the economy,” Veneman said. “We want to hear from

the public on how we can update, streamline or remove unnecessary regulatory burdens.”

Because of the short time period set to respond to the presidential initiative, comments must be received by March 13 to be of value in the regulatory review process, Veneman said.

Comments should be submitted to the agency responsible for the regulation or program within USDA. To the extent possible the department will include comments relevant to pending rulemaking procedures in the dockets for those rules.

A notice requesting comments is scheduled for publication in next week's Federal Register.

For further information contact Tim Obst, USDA, Office of the General Counsel, Room 107-W, 14th and Independence Ave., S.W., Washington, D.C., 20250-1400; tele. (202) 720-9190.

Roger Runningen (202) 720-4623

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BAIT MINNOWS STUDIED AS SENTINELS OF WATER POLLUTION

WASHINGTON, Feb. 24—Mummichog minnows are a bait for fishing, but U.S. Department of Agriculture studies have found a possible new role for the fish—it offers an early signal that coastal waterways are becoming polluted and perhaps hazardous to health.

“We’re testing mummichog minnows as biological indicators of water quality to be sure farm chemicals—fertilizers and pesticides—are used safely,” biologist George Gassner said.

He said the fish are kept alive, unharmed, so they can be returned to their natural habitat for long-term monitoring of coastal rivers and estuaries for industrial chemical discharges and farm runoff.

“Mummichogs are prone to liver tumors in the presence of carcinogens in the water,” he said.

“We now have the technology to detect invisible liver tissue damage in live fish,” he said. Such tissue damage is an early sign of liver lesions that later can form tumors.

Gassner is using a magnetic resonance imaging scanner for studies in the Environmental Chemistry Laboratory operated by USDA's Agricultural Research Service at Beltsville, Md. His scanner is a smaller

version of those hospitals use for diagnostic tests on people.

He said the mummichog studies are part of the lab's search for biosensors—living plants, animals or tissues used to give an early indication of the presence of pollutants. Other aquatic candidates for magnetic resonance scanning, he said, include oysters, crayfish and clams.

At the lab, Gassner said, "each mummichog is gently anesthetized and wrapped in a plastic foam blanket to protect against handling and drying while undergoing tests."

Gassner started work on the technique in 1990, after learning about extensive data on mummichogs taken from clean and creosote-contaminated sites in Virginia's Elizabeth River. That data had been collected by Wolfgang K. Vogelbein, an aquatic pathologist at the Virginia Institute of Marine Science.

Vogelbein did autopsies, finding a high rate of liver tumors in mummichogs living in contaminated water. In one study, 35 percent of the fish had tumors.

According to Gassner, the data was a base for evaluating the fish as "a potential environmental sentinel," in support of the President's water quality initiative begun in 1989 to ensure safe farming techniques. He said, "the fish are abundant along the entire East Coast. They also remain in the same area all their lives."

In a cooperative effort with Vogelbein, Gassner's goal is to verify that the scanner will detect cancer in the fish long before it can be confirmed by autopsy.

"Not only is magnetic resonance imaging technology more humane," Gassner said, "but it also allows us to follow the development of these tumors in individual fish. We can even watch for remission of the pretumorous condition when the fish are placed in a clean environment."

Using this approach, he said, "environmental scientists and managers from federal, state, and local agencies could periodically monitor fish from various waterways."

Don Comis (301) 504-9073

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BELOW-AVERAGE STREAMFLOWS FORECAST FOR MANY AREAS IN WEST

WASHINGTON, Feb. 24—Much of the West may be facing another year of below-average streamflows, according to the latest outlook for the Western water supply by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Soil Conservation Service. With only two months remaining during the usual snowpack accumulation phase of this season, very heavy snowfalls will be needed to overcome current shortages.

Based on snowpack and precipitation data, SCS forecasts below- to well-below average spring and summer runoff in California, Oregon, Nevada, Utah, Wyoming, most of Idaho, central Washington, northern Arizona, northwestern Colorado, and areas throughout Montana.

As a result of low precipitation and snowpack, 1992 could be the sixth consecutive year of below-average streamflows for some of these areas, said SCS Chief William Richards. Even with the recent storms, the ongoing drought continues in many areas, Richards said.

Some areas of the West are forecast to receive above- to well-above average streamflows. They include central Arizona, much of northcentral New Mexico, and a part of southcentral Colorado.

Reservoir storage on the last day of January was average to well-above average for six of the 12 states reporting. Nevada has the lowest reservoir storage, reporting only 10 percent of average. Reservoir storage is highest in New Mexico, at 177 percent of average.

Western states depend on snowmelt for about 75 percent of their water supply. SCS and the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration's National Weather Service jointly analyze snow and precipitation data to forecast seasonal runoff in the West.

The state-by-state outlook:

ALASKA—Heavy storms continued in the southern coastal region of Alaska. By Feb. 1 snowpack in this area had become the largest ever measured this early in the season, with many sites more than 300 percent of average.

ARIZONA—Average to above-average water supplies should be available to Arizona water users. January precipitation ranged from below-average in the extreme northwest to well-above average in the south and southeast portions of the state. Major reservoirs held storage near or above-average for Feb. 1.

CALIFORNIA—Precipitation was about 33 percent of the monthly average throughout the Sierra drainage basins and stream runoff was as low as 20 percent of average during January. Seasonal precipitation ranges from 48 percent of average in the Trinity and Sacramento drainage basins to 55 to 60 percent of average in the San Joaquin and Tulare Lake basins. Streamflow averages about 25 percent of average statewide. Reservoir storage statewide stood at 55 percent on Feb. 1.

COLORADO—Dry conditions prevailed across Colorado during January. Much of Colorado can expect below-average runoff during the snowmelt period. Reservoir storage is near-to below-average in several basins.

IDAHO—Snowpack percentages have plummeted following one of the driest Januaries on record. Combined with nearly empty reservoirs in many basins, these low snowpacks point to the likelihood of critically low water supplies across much of southern and central Idaho.

MONTANA—Mountain precipitation was below-to well-below average during January with most areas across southern Montana receiving less than half their average. Snowpack conditions have deteriorated significantly across southwestern, central and south-central Montana. Snowpacks are now near-to below-normal throughout the state. Most irrigation reservoirs report near-to above-average storage.

NEVADA—Water supply conditions for the Great Basin of Nevada and eastern California are well-below average and severe drought conditions continue. January precipitation remains well-below average in all basins except the Lower Colorado River Basin where they have received above-average precipitation for January and are average for the water year. Seven major reservoirs average 6 percent of capacity and 10 percent of average.

NEW MEXICO—Snowpack conditions statewide remain near average to much-above average. The southwest and south-central mountains received significant snowfall during January. Water supply forecasts have decreased in the north and west central basins and increased in the southwest and south central basins.

OREGON—Water supplies continue to be much-below average throughout Oregon. The mountain snowpack is very poor with January producing less than normal accumulation. Reservoir storage was up slightly due to water conservation measures.

UTAH—Snowpack accumulation has slipped into the much-below average category at many sites in Utah. Precipitation totals, while somewhat higher than snowpack averages, are still below average virtually everywhere in Utah. Streamflow forecasts have declined 5 percent to 20 percent from the previous month.

WASHINGTON—January precipitation was 97 percent of normal statewide and varied from 63 percent of average in the Walla Walla Basin to 157 percent in the Olympic Basin. Feb. 1 reservoir storage is generally good, with reservoirs in the Yakima Basin at 92 percent of average and 55 percent of capacity. Forecasts for runoff vary from 100 percent of average for the Bumping River to 69 percent for the Snake River. January streamflows varied from 27 percent of normal on the Walla Walla River near Milton Freewater, Oregon, to 111 percent on the Skagit River.

WYOMING—Reservoir storage for the state is more than a year ago. However, precipitation was almost nonexistent during January. Only water users in the Bighorn Mountains and along the eastern end of the Uinta Mountains can expect near normal streamflows during the spring and summer months. The remainder of the state will see flows that are below-to much-below average during the runoff season.

Ted Kupelian (202) 720-5776

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USDA ANNOUNCES REVISION TO DAIRY REFUND PAYMENT PROGRAM

WASHINGTON, Feb. 25—Secretary of Agriculture Edward Madigan today announced a revision of the Dairy Refund Payment Program (DRPP) to allow additional persons to receive payment as long there is no increase in that dairy operation's production or number of dairy cattle.

The revised policy will make eligible for refund those dairy operations which were previously ineligible under the DRPP when another person was added to or removed from the operation.

"This change," Madigan said, "will make our rules simpler and more equitable for dairymen who made a good-faith effort to hold the line on production, and allow them to receive assessment refunds."

Adding or removing persons to those shown as marketing milk for commercial purposes from the dairy unit will not be considered a change

in operation if the persons being added or removed do not have their own dairy cows that will be combined with or removed from the dairy cows already in the operation.

There are two exceptions:

—A minor child of the dairy owner, who is involved in a 4-H, FFA or other educational project, may be added to the dairy unit along with a small number of dairy cows.

—Two individual dairy producers, who are married during the base or refund period, may combine their dairy units and dairy cows without it being considered a new operation.

Also, a transfer of milk marketing history will be permitted if all the dairy cattle and dairy equipment are transferred to a family member. Transfer of the land which provided feed for the dairy operation and the dairy facility is no longer a requirement for a transfer of milk marketing history to occur.

Dairy producers should contact the local Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service office before March 13 if they have not applied or been disapproved because of previous policy. The deadline to file a signed application is March 16, 1992.

Robert Feist (202) 720-6789

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NEW CORN RESISTS AFLATOXIN FUNGUS

WASHINGTON, Feb. 25—Seed companies have begun working with a new U.S. Department of Agriculture corn that repels the fungus that makes aflatoxin.

“This is only the second strain of publicly released corn able to resist infection by the aflatoxin fungus,” said Gene E. Scott of USDA’s Agricultural Research Service. “When breeders can put this resistance into new, high-quality commercial varieties, farmers will for the first time get a major defense against aflatoxin right in their cornfields.”

Aflatoxin, a potential carcinogen, is produced naturally by the fungus *Aspergillus flavus*, said Scott, an agronomist at the Crop Science Research Laboratory, Starkville, Miss.

Federal rules specify that raw grains or finished products cannot be sold across state lines for human consumption or animal feed if they contain 20 parts per billion or more of aflatoxin. Corn, peanuts,

cottonseed, some tree nuts and a few other crops are susceptible to the fungus. High heat, drought and humidity are among the chief factors that increase the chance that the fungus can infect and spread in crop plants.

In field tests with the new corn line, officially called Mp420, “we found the fungus in only nine percent of the kernels tested,” Scott said. “That’s very low considering we exposed the corn ears to infection levels many times higher than what you’d normally see in a field.”

ARS and the Mississippi Agricultural and Forestry Experiment Station released Mp420 in 1991 and the first resistant line, Mp313E, in 1989. “We’ve had about 40 requests for Mp313E from breeders and about a dozen so far the the new Mp420,” said Scott. Resistant commercial varieties are at least five years away, he added.

One company working on both lines is Pioneer Hi-Bred International. “This resistance is something we want very much to offer to farmers,” said James Wright, Pioneer’s southern regional coordinator based in Union City, Tenn.

To develop Mp420, Scott and colleagues began by crossing two varieties, ‘Yellow Mosby’ and ‘Hill Yellow Dent.’ For 10 generations, they made selections from self-pollinated offspring of the test plants. This eventually stabilized the inheritance of genes, including genes to resist the *A. flavus* fungus, in the Mp420 line.

In Mp420’s final tests, Scott and ARS plant pathologist Natale Zummo challenged thousands of corn ears with fungus infections. Using a tool called a pinbar, they injected fungi into each kernel on one row of kernels on each ear. “With Mp420, fungi spread to an average nine percent of kernels in adjacent rows, compared to 31 percent for plants that didn’t have the resistance,” Scott said.

The comparison, he added, probably far understates the difference in toxin production. In a 1986 study, he and colleagues found that a tripling in the percent of infected kernels resulted in 23 times more aflatoxin.

While Starkville scientists work to breed new aflatoxin-resistant corn, the agency continues other efforts to thwart the toxin. Efforts include breeding fungus-resistant peanuts, using biotechnology to disarm the fungi’s ability to make the toxin, developing new ways to remove infected peanuts and grain after harvest and new methods for removing the toxin from feeds.

Jim De Quattro (301) 504-8648

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USDA ANNOUNCES APPOINTMENTS TO THE UNITED SOYBEAN BOARD

WASHINGTON, Feb. 26—Secretary of Agriculture Edward Madigan today announced two appointments to fill vacancies on the United Soybean Board.

Charles H. Van Bogaert, a soybean producer from Belmont, Wis., will complete the term of John E. Hoffman, Whitewater, Wis.; and Alfred J. Lanie Sr., a soybean producer from Youngsville, La., will complete the term of Patrick J. Quinn, Monterey, La. Both appointees will serve until Dec. 1.

The secretary selected the appointees from soybean producers nominated by state soybean boards.

The 63-member United Soybean Board is authorized by the 1990 Soybean Promotion, Research and Consumer Information Act. It administers a program of soybean promotion and research to expand uses for soybeans and soybean products in domestic and foreign markets.

Rebecca Unkenholz (202) 720-8998

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